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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF JESUS. II

Conducted by
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Part II. Jesus' Ethical Principles

The two books here to be read are Plummer, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*; and Stalker, *The Ethic of Jesus*.

Many books undertake to present the teaching of Jesus. The greatest number of these books are commentaries on the Gospels, prepared primarily for the use of ministers in their homiletical exposition of Scripture. The commentaries take up each passage in the arrangement of the particular Gospel, and give it a concrete exposition. Since the teaching of Jesus is reported most comprehensively in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the commentaries on these two books are of primary importance. And since the Gospel of Matthew presents an account of the teaching more extensive, systematic, and original (on the whole) than Luke's Gospel, it comes about that commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew have long been the most deliberate and the most valuable expositions of Jesus' teaching. One of the most recent (1909) and best commentaries of this kind is Plummer's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Dr. Plummer is one of the foremost British interpreters of the New Testament, with a list of great commentaries to his credit; the chief of these, in addition to this volume on Matthew, are his three commentaries on Luke, First Corinthians, and Second Corinthians, in the series entitled "The International Critical Commentary" (published in America by Charles Scribner's Sons). Plummer's *Matthew* is here selected because, all things considered, it gives the most available, complete, historical, and useful interpretation of Jesus' ethical teaching, in its content, proportion, perspective, and spirit. The volume treats the whole of the Gospel of Matthew, and therefore the events and deeds of Jesus' ministry, as well as his moral and religious message. Our attention will be directed particularly to his message, in its ethical elements and aspects.

The introduction to the commentary deals briefly with the following matters:

(1) *The author*: he concludes that the writer of our First Gospel was not the apostle Matthew, since our Greek Matthew is not a translation from the Aramaic Logia which early tradition attributed to the apostle Matthew. But this author, who was a Jewish Christian unknown to us by name, did in fact incorporate into his book a great deal of material collected by the apostle Matthew in the Logia, and on that account his name was used in conjunction with the Greek Gospel as

giving it a kind of apostolic guaranty and authority. (2) *The sources*: the two main sources for the Gospel of Matthew were the Gospel of Mark, which the author used in nearly the same form as that in which it has come down to us, and the Logia of Matthew just mentioned. The Gospel of Mark furnished to the Gospel of Matthew its general narrative of the events of Jesus' ministry, while the Logia gave the main account of his teaching. Its contents were selected in accordance with the needs and hopes of the first Christians, who sought moral guidance for present living and assurance of future salvation. Therefore the discourse material in the Gospel of Matthew presents in part the ethical message of Jesus and in part his doctrinal message. These two elements are not separated, or even in thought differentiated; but it is observable that chaps. 5-7, 10, 15, 18, and 23 are predominantly ethical (dealing with present conduct) while chaps. 11, 12, 13, 24, and 25 are predominantly doctrinal (dealing with future salvation). The minor sources of the Gospel of Matthew are not important for our immediate purpose, except as they supplied some small portion of ethical teaching not already furnished by the Gospel of Mark and the Logia. The author of the First Gospel used his sources with some freedom, since he modified the language of their accounts, abbreviated or expanded them, omitted or toned down certain features, and heightened the teaching concerning the person and work of Jesus as the Christ. (3) *Plan of the Gospel*: The author adopts in the main the framework of Jesus' ministry as given in the Second Gospel, with its events and deeds as there recounted; but his chief concern is to give from the Logia a representative summary of Jesus' teaching, arranged in several groups or discourses set here and there in the Markan framework. Five such sections of teaching material are distinguished by the author with the closing formula, "It came to pass when Jesus finished" (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). (4) *The Christology of the First Gospel*: The book is anti-Jewish in showing that, although the Messiah was of them, and came to them first (10:58), yet by their rejection of him they had lost their birthright of priority. The kingdom of Israel had become open to all nations. The Jew must become a Christian, and hold to the Christian Messiah. The author sets forth the passage of the Gospel from the peculiar people to the whole race of mankind. The doctrine of the person and work of Christ contained in the First Gospel originated in and accurately represents Jesus' thought and teaching concerning himself and his mission. (5) *The date*: the Gospel of Matthew was written between the years 70 and 75 A.D. Plummer thinks it possible to be that explicit concerning the time of its composition. He thinks it highly probable that the sayings of Jesus which the evangelist got from the apostle Matthew's Logia (in a Greek form), and which constitute so large a portion of the First Gospel, are the very earliest information we possess respecting Jesus' teaching; and in them we get back nearest to him of whom it was said, "Never man thus spake" (John 7:46). It was the presence of this element which made the First Gospel such a favorite and gave it so wide a circulation.

We pass now to Dr. Plummer's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, which is the most extended and the most important discourse section in the First Gospel as respects the ethical teaching of Jesus. Plummer's treatment is extended, but general; critical problems are given only slight attention. He regards the discourse as a digest of Jesus' practical teaching; some of it was gathered from

various occasions by tradition or the author, but in the main the material contained in Matt., chaps. 5-7, is a report of an actual discourse presented in this fashion by Jesus himself. In his exposition of the teaching Plummer has availed himself of the best contents of several recent treatises on the Sermon on the Mount.

He finds that the general plan of the discourse was to interpret and to inculcate *the ideal Christian life*. The Beatitudes which stand at the head of the Sermon present an epitome of that ideal: they describe eight different elements of excellence which every man should acquire in order to attain to perfect spiritual well-being. Men must recognize their dependence upon God for all spiritual goodness and blessing, they must feel keenly the sin and sorrow of humanity, they must be humble toward God, they must yearn and strive for the righteousness that is the fulfilment of God's will, they must feel, think, and act lovingly toward their fellow-men, they must devote themselves wholly to spiritual interests, they must be peaceable and peace-making, they must endure all things for the sake of the Kingdom. It is people of these characteristics who bring to realization God's purpose in creating man; by their message, their work, and their example they lead men into the kind of life that is eternal.

The Christian living that Jesus describes is higher and truer than that enjoined by the Old Testament and by current Judaism, in that Jesus reaches more deeply, more fully, and more surely into the fundamental principles of goodness, and gives an ideal that is simpler, finer, more personal, and more impelling. He points out the limited, superficial conceptions and attainments of righteousness among the scribes and Pharisees. He condemns the scribes and Pharisees for these shortcomings especially because they are the religious teachers and exemplars of the Jewish people. They were right in thinking that God had revealed his will in the Law and the Prophets; but they were wrong when they refused to hear from himself a new and still higher interpretation of God's will, made possible and necessary by the progress of humanity through the centuries.

The chief aspects of this ethical advance which Jesus proposed are put before us in the Sermon on the Mount with striking clearness, conciseness, and impressiveness. His ethical principles are here given a classical grouping and expression. Other chapters in Matthew, and still other chapters in Luke, contain various statements of these teachings, with extended illustrations and applications of them. All these passages are satisfying and useful. But we may gather them together around the Sermon passages, and treat these principles summarily in the exposition of Matt., chaps. 5-7. Jesus conceived and set forth his new, higher interpretation of human duty in terms of Jewish religious ethics, and in specific contrast with the Jewish moral standard and practices which he saw about him. Jesus was a lofty and strenuous ethical idealist—no one has equaled him in this respect, and perhaps Paul is the only one who has approached him. The moral defects and shortcomings of men impressed and stirred him profoundly. He could not endure them; men must be taught and impelled to overcome them. With great severity he castigates men for their sins, and warns them against the wrath and retribution of God. The Day of Judgment was announced as at hand, preceding the incoming of the Kingdom; and there would be no salvation in this new age for any but the righteous—not for those who counted *themselves* righteous, but whom *God* accounted righteous, according to the type of righteousness which

Jesus himself declared. Even the scribes and Pharisees, the religious teachers and exemplars of the Jewish people, would find their righteousness inadequate to gain them entrance to the Kingdom.

The ethical principles of Jesus, then, appear to be as follows:

1. Men must be righteous at heart; they must be thoroughly good within. Their feelings, choices, purposes, ideas, must be right. They must be spontaneously and individually good. The Jewish conception and performance of righteousness fell short in this respect. We say Judaism was "legalistic"; what we mean is that it depended too much upon the law and its enforcement as a means of making men good, too little upon the spontaneous personal initiative. Much can be done to make men good by statutes enjoined and enforced by an institution of justice, with penalties for their violation. Many men require external compulsion to keep them right; for this reason a law and its administration are necessary. Let us suppose that Jesus would have conceded this. But he was not a jurist, to work with law: he was an ethicist, to inculcate principles. Jurists might employ a compulsory code to force men into goodness from without: he would appeal to their essential moral nature to achieve of their own will a fundamental goodness within. We call this "autonomous," as against "heteronomous," ethics; in other words, that is a higher kind of righteousness which a man achieves who is his own law, who lives by his own principles rather than by compulsory obedience to a formulated legal code. The supreme ethical status is for a man to choose goodness, to have his own ideal and to hold himself steadily to its realization in feeling, purpose, and act. To be good because one *has* to is something; to be good because one *wants* to is much more. The way ahead ethically is by spontaneous righteousness. Some men may be restrained from murdering their fellows by the prohibition and threat of the law; but the fundamental and ultimate cure of murder must come through a controlling altruistic feeling and will. Jesus stands for the development of this principle of love which shall operate within every man to make every feeling, purpose, and act kind and helpful.

2. The criterion of righteousness is internal, not external; God judges men, not by the deeds which they perform or do not perform, but primarily by their feelings and motives. Jesus did not think it enough that a man should refrain from the *acts* of murder and adultery; he must also refrain from the anger and the lust which tended to issue so. Law seems to have the peculiar limitation that it speaks of and deals with the act alone; we have no laws to prevent anger and lust. We need not suppose that Jesus understood the sixth and seventh commandments as having no concern with the motives, but he did observe around him that men did not overcome their feelings of hate and lust, even though they abstained from murder and adultery. Merely to abstain from the acts is not all of righteousness, or even the main part of righteousness; for essential goodness means good feelings and good purposes, out of which good acts will normally flow. The Jews placed too little consideration upon this matter of inner quality; they made too much of external performance. The scribes were very busy practicing and enjoining a multitude of duties, moral and ceremonial and liturgical. The yoke of the law was indeed a heavy burden—quite unnecessarily heavy. Jesus thought and said. Men could be righteous without doing all the things the scribal laws demanded. Jesus criticized the Sabbath law and the law of ceremonial washings and the pre-

scriptions as to fasting. He wished to reduce and simplify the external obligations of man; he wished to restore freedom and inner quality to life.

3. Acts in themselves good have a relative value; some good acts are of more importance than other good acts. The defect of law is that it enjoins a multitude of things without duly indicating their relative value. One must not think that the Jews were without discernment or distinction in these matters, but in general the tendency was to the overvaluation of small things and the undervaluation of large ones. They did many small things in punctilious obedience to the requirements of the law, and left undone many large things—because the small ones were more quickly and easily done, and because the great importance of the large things was not sufficiently in view. To tithe the smallest seeds they raised, and then to neglect justice, mercy, and faith, seemed to Jesus a primary mistake. Jesus was for testing the value of any act by the degree of service which it rendered to humanity; acts of love and helpfulness were always the most important, always had the right of way over ceremonial and liturgical performances. Also acts apparently good are not really good unless they have good motives behind them: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting ostentatiously done, to gain the attention and praise of men, were thereby robbed of the good quality they were supposed inherently to possess.

4. Righteousness demands the entire attention and devotion of men. Men are to set their hearts on things above, not on things on the earth; they cannot serve both God and mammon. Jesus meant that material things were to be viewed as transient and incidental. God would provide for these needs of men. Men were to fix their attention and effort wholly upon spiritual things. Men were to endure and to sacrifice everything for the Kingdom. Jesus' thought here was most strenuous. He exemplified in his own conduct the indifference to material comforts and possessions, for he lived a simple, frugal life. He exemplified also the utmost degree of endurance and self-sacrifice in his devotion to his spiritual mission. As he lived, he asked his followers to live. The austerity and other-worldliness which appear in his teaching and manner of life the average man cannot understand, much less practice. But Jesus was not an average man, and he was not satisfied with the average man's type of living. Greatness makes larger and higher demands; greatness is not obtained by listening to and imitating the average man. And humanity will not be uplifted by diluting the demands of Jesus' teaching to the taste and capacity of average men; to uplift humanity we must win and elevate men to the greatness of Jesus; we must rise to the heights of his ideal. *He* was not satisfied with common-place righteousness; shall *we* be? He summoned men to a strenuous, absorbing life of devotion to spiritual qualities and achievements; shall we follow him?

For many years Dr. Stalker has been known to Bible students through a long series of popular writings on the New Testament, especially his *Life of Christ* and *Life of Paul*. In his latest volume, *The Ethic of Jesus* (1909), he gathers together topically the portions of Jesus' message which pertain to conduct and character. He takes passages only from the Synoptic Gospels, promising a forthcoming book on the Gospel of John.

In the plan of his book, Dr. Stalker evidently felt compelled to make some concession to classical ethics. The concession that he makes is to outline his book

in three parts according to the scholastic formal terms, The Highest Good, Virtue, and Duty. The *modern* ethics, as expounded in current scientific books upon the subject, receives little attention. He seeks a common ground between theoretic ethics and the practical ethics of Jesus by the following equations (p. 56):

“The Highest Good”=the Blessings of the Kingdom;

“Virtue”=the Character of the Citizens of the Kingdom;

“Duty”=the Laws of the Kingdom.

To be sure, the ethical problem for Jesus and the Jews, as earlier for Aristotle and the Greeks, was essentially the same: to define how men should live; and the answer they gave was essentially the same: that men should live in accordance with their highest ideal. We do well to consider how much in agreement occidental and oriental ethics were. Dr. Stalker wishes to show this unity by putting Jesus' teaching into the Greek framework; but this seems a mechanical way of doing it. His chapter headings are better chosen, being in the main after the thought and style of Jesus: chap. ii, “The Gospel or Blessedness”; chap. iii, “The Kingdom of God”; chap. iv, “Righteousness”; chap. v, “Missing the Highest Good”; chap. vi, “Sin”; chap. vii, “Repentance”; chap. viii, “Faith”; chap. ix, “The Invitation of Christ”; chap. x, “The Cross and Offenses”; chap. xi, “The Love of God”; chap. xii, “The Things of God”; chap. xiii, “The Love of Man”; chap. xiv, “The Things of Man”; chap. xv, “The Family”; chap. xvi, “The State.”

One cannot imagine that Jesus would himself have chosen this set of topics under which to classify his teachings; nor is it a list which the present science of ethics could use. The titles are partly Aristotelian (chap. v), partly primitive Christian (chaps. ii, iii, iv, xi, xiii), partly systematic theological (chaps. vi, vii, viii), partly homiletical (chaps. ix, x, xii, xiv), and partly sociological (chaps. xv, xvi).¹ The difficulty of choosing a set of topics under which to classify the teachings of Jesus is due to the historical fact that Jesus did not give his teachings in a classified form, nor did he even *think* them so. His mind and method were occasional, desultory, concrete, rather than systematic, logical, and abstract. The latter qualities appeal to the scholar, but the former qualities appeal to the common man; and Jesus was a preacher to the common man, his thought and expression were popular. It is therefore quite intelligible why the Gospels even today are more widely read than the books by scholars who represent from their own point of view the teaching of Jesus. Nevertheless, Dr. Stalker's book will be found very useful to the student of the New Testament who wishes to consider Jesus' sayings in some topical arrangement.

The student should read carefully the Gospel passages named at the beginning of each chapter of the book before reading the chapter itself, in order to judge whether Dr. Stalker gives a true reproduction of Jesus' thought. The process of collecting a verse here and a few verses there from the many chapters of Matthew, Mark, and Luke to elucidate Jesus' teaching concerning the Kingdom, or right-

¹The direct social aspect of the book was however so deficient that the author acceded to the suggestion of his advisers and allowed the book to be supplemented by an appended chapter entitled “The Church and the Social Teaching of Jesus,” written by Rev. F. J. Rae.

eousness, or faith, or the love of God, or the family breaks up the historical setting of his teaching, and tends to obscure the original perspective, emphasis, color, and relation; there may easily come in also a pragmatizing of the meaning of the sayings, to make their message serve our present need. Our author does not wholly escape these dangers, but he gives an excellent exposition of Jesus' ethics, at the same time showing its fundamental agreement with classical theoretic ethics.

At the end of the book (p. 368) he confesses his faith in Christ not only as divine teacher but also as divine Savior in these words:

Jesus lifts up a far higher standard than any other ethical teacher; but little would He deserve the name of Savior if this were all He did. To demand that vastly more should be produced out of human nature than had ever been expected from it can be wise and beneficent only if first there is vastly more put into it. And it is because the Savior does this—because He is the Giver of the ethical life which He demands—that we adore Him by a name which is above every name.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is the teaching of Jesus presented in the Gospel of Matthew?
2. Does the Sermon on the Mount contain a digest of Jesus' ethical teaching?
3. Was Jesus' ideal of conduct and character higher than that of the Old Testament?
4. Why did Jesus severely criticize the scribes and Pharisees?
5. Did Jesus employ the thought-forms and technical terms of current Judaism? If so, why?
6. Was Jesus' appeal to the essential moral nature of the individual man?
7. In righteousness what is the relation between feelings and acts?
8. How much devotion to the spiritual aspects of life did Jesus demand?
9. Why is it difficult to classify the teachings of Jesus?

Books for Further Reading

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| Wendt, <i>The Teaching of Jesus</i> . 2 vols. | Harnack, <i>What Is Christianity?</i> |
| Montefiore, <i>The Synoptic Gospels</i> . 2 vols. | Moffatt, <i>Theology of the Gospels</i> . |
| J. Weiss, art. "The Ethics of Jesus" in
Hastings' <i>Dict. Christ and Gospels</i> . | Haering, <i>The Ethics of the Christian Life</i> .
Dewey and Tufts, <i>Ethics</i> . |

Traveling Libraries containing the books required for this course are now ready for distribution. The reading-courses on "The Apostolic Age in the Light of Today," "The Psychology of Religion," "Jesus in the Light of Modern Scholarship," "The Efficient Church," "The Expansion of Christianity in the Twentieth Century," "The Religion of the Hebrews and Modern Scholarship," "The Educational Work of the Church," and "Significant Tendencies in Modern Theology" are also furnished with libraries. For information address THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.